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Communication Breakdown between the White House and Our Intelligence Experts

7/17/03

An independent commission should examine the Bush Administration's use of intelligence on Iraq.

By Congressman Henry A. Waxman

Last year, I was one of a minority of Democratic members of Congress who voted to give President Bush authority to use force against Iraq. I did so in part because of reports from the Bush Administration that former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein was developing a nuclear weapons program that posed an imminent threat to the United States. It was also my hope that passing a congressional resolution authorizing force would show the United Nations and Hussein that we were serious about disarming Iraq and get the UN to cooperate in this effort.

Over the past few months, however, serious questions have been raised about what the Bush Administration told Congress and the American public about Iraq's nuclear weapons program. It is now clear that there was an inexcusable breakdown between the White House and our intelligence experts prior to the Iraq war.

In his State of the Union address last January, President Bush stated, "The British government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa." Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice subsequently repeated this claim.

We now know, however, that this report had been debunked by intelligence experts in the Administration nearly a year before the president's speech. In an op-ed that appeared in the New York Times, a former ambassador to Africa, Joseph C. Wilson, described how he was dispatched to Niger at the request of the Vice President and the CIA to investigate the validity of the documents. Ambassador Wilson concluded in February 2002 that the evidence was not credible and reported this

finding to the CIA.

The State Department also apparently knew the information was false. Greg Thielmann, Director of the Office of Strategic, Proliferation, and Military Issues in the State Department, told Newsweek that the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence had concluded the documents were "garbage."

The international community shared this assessment. After the Bush Administration finally turned over the documents to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in February 2003, it took only days and a Google search for the IAEA to conclude that the documents were forgeries.

Since March, I have been repeatedly asking President Bush for an explanation for why he and other top Administration officials made claims that were based on what turned out to be obviously fake evidence. The Administration, however, has provided only oblique and conflicting responses.

The first explanation from the Bush Administration, as reported in the Washington Post, was "We fell for it." But we know that was not true. Then, National Security Advisor Rice asserted, "Maybe someone knew down in the bowels of the agency, but no one in our circles knew that there were doubts and suspicious that this might be a forgery." This also seems to be inaccurate.

So, what is the real story?

I, along with over 20 other members of Congress who supported the resolution for the use of force in Iraq, recently introduced legislation to establish an independent commission to examine the intelligence on Iraq. This independent commission would be responsible for examining executive branch efforts to collect, assess, and interpret intelligence regarding the threats posed by Iraq, as well as representations made by Bush Administration officials about these threats.

A broad, independent inquiry is necessary to help us determine how and why this breakdown in intelligence happened so that we can make sure it never happens again.

This is not an issue about whether we were right to go to war in Iraq. This is about restoring the confidence of the American public and the international community in our government.

Congressman Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles) represents the 30th District, which includes Beverly Hills.

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